Love

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13

This passage in 1 Corinthians is among the most misunderstood chapters in Scripture. This chapter does not stand alone. It is actually a part of the prior chapter on Spiritual Gifts and applies directly to those gifts. Many people will try to take this chapter and have it stand alone as a dissertation on love or a hymn about love. It is not. A number of years ago a couple planning to be married asked that I read 1 Corinthians 13 as part of the ceremony. I told them that I was reluctant to do that and suggested several other passages that are more appropriate when applied to a marriage. This chapter is not about man/woman love. It is about something greater.

Paul is addressing this letter specifically to the new church at Corinth which has been a hot bed of pagan worship for some long time. The pagan worship was self-centered. It did not care much about others. Paul has just told the Corinthians about spiritual gifts and encouraged them to identify their particular gift. Then this chapter follows. Paul begins this section with the statement that he will now show them and us the most excellent way. What is he talking about? He is talking about the most excellent way to use those wonderful gifts that have been given to believers by the Holy Spirit.

Let’s review this thing called a spiritual gift. It is a gift that comes from the Holy Spirit and is given to each believer as the Spirit sees fit. The gift is then to be used to edify the church, other Christians. This is not a personal gift. It is a helpful gift to be used for the edification of others. How can we build up another if we do not love that person?

When Paul wrote this the Corinthians had a Love Feast prior to taking communion. This was akin to our fellowship dinners but the people in this church had not yet begun to develop as Christians. They began to eat as soon as they got the church basement. They did not wait for others. Some ate a lot and left none for others. Some drank so much wine they got drunk. This does not make for an enjoyable pot luck meal. From this practice we can see the mind set of many of the people in this new church in Corinth. They were all about themselves. They were not thinking of the others around them.

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Now Paul is telling them how to use these wonderful things called spiritual gifts. These gifts are not for themselves but for the edification of the church. They are to be used to build up the church. Paul was saying, “OK, you have a gift, this is how you should use it. Use it with love.” This love he is talking about is what we refer to as agape love. There are three or four Greek words that are translated into English as love. This love Paul is telling us about is not brotherly love. It is not romantic love. It is a love that determines what is best for another and then does what helps to achieve that. It wants what is best for another and it tries to get that for another. This is the love that God the Father has for us.

Jonathan Swift, the satirical author of Gulliver’s Travels said, “We have just enough love religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.” There was guile in his voice when he said this. Paul is attacking this problem but he is doing it with less vitriol.

No matter the gift that you have it should be exciting. I hope it is exciting but no matter how exciting it may be that gift is useless if not ministered in love. It may even be dangerous to others. Do you want to be able to determine or measure the maturity of a Christian? Maturity in a Christian is demonstrated by a growing love for God, for God’s people and for those who are lost. Be careful! Measure yourself before trying to measure the maturity of another Christian. And remember that you are looking for love. That is visible in how the person being measured cares about the needs of another and how he/she is acting to secure what is good for the other.

No spiritual gift can be used to its fullest unless the possessor of that gift is acting in love toward another. Paul gives us three characteristics of Christian love that demonstrate why it is so important.

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First Paul shows us that love is enriching. We can see this in verses 1-3. Here he names five of the spiritual gifts. This is not a complete list but he is using it to make a point because these gifts are more visible. No matter how great the gift, Paul tells us that without love the exercise of these gifts means nothing. Speaking without love just creates nothing but sound, or noise. It is of no particular value. Ministry without love cheapens the one ministering and does not help the hearer. However, ministry with love helps to build up the whole church. Paul tells us to speak the truth in love.

Christians are taught to love one another. God taught us to love by sending His Son, and God the Son taught us to love by going willingly to the cross. He also told us to love each other. The Holy Spirit teaches us to love one another by pouring God’s love into our hearts. The most important thing that a Christian can learn is to love because real love enriches all that it touches.

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Next he shows us that love is edifying. He covers this in verses 4-7. We do not use this word edifying very often any more. I think that sometimes this is sad. To edify simply means to build up. When it comes to others many are good at the opposite. They can tear another down with great skill and efficiency. That is not love. Love builds up others. To tear someone down shows that a person does not have love. 1 Corinthians 8:1 says that knowledge puffs up but love builds up. My mother used to say to me when I was small that I was too smart for my own good. I knew what she meant. She was not against knowledge. She was against me using what I knew for less than loving purposes. We do that don’t we? Do we use what we know for the good of others or to make ourselves look good?

When we lived in LaSalle County there was a wonderful lady in our church who used to say that we should not envy the gift that another has. She was right. Rather than envy what another has been called to do love calls us to do what we have been called to do and to do it well.

When the people in Corinth had a meeting they were impatient with others. They did not listen to what another had to say. They were waiting for a chance to jump in and make everyone hear what he had to say. This is common today. If they had love they would consider the position of the other. This does not mean that they would be required to agree but they would patiently consider the other.

Many times the Corinthians were jealous of the other person’s gift. Love would enable them to rejoice with the other and to encourage the other with their gift. Some put values on the various gifts. Stop to consider that each gift is a gift from God and should be handled as such. The Holy Spirit gives gifts as He determines best. The gift that you have has been carefully selected by God. If you received a birthday present or a Christmas present from God, would you exchange it? I hope not. Then do not be jealous of the gift that God has given another because He has given you a gift that He has specially selected for you. Use your gift for others and encourage those with other gifts to do likewise.

We know from passages in 1 Corinthians 4 and 5 that these people were puffed up with pride. But love removes that pride and self- centeredness and replaces them with concern and caring for others.

When the Corinthians gathered for communion they had a fellowship or pot luck meal beforehand. Some ate a lot left none for others. No one waited until all were gathered. Many pigged out and some got drunk on wine. Had they had love they would not have behaved this way; they would have cared for others as much as they were concerned with themselves. They would love others so that their behavior pleased the Lord.

Paul goes ahead and he says that love does not keep a record of wrongs. Now he is meddling, isn’t he. Love does not keep a record of wrongs. I heard about a church member this week who actually carried a notebook in which he has listed all of the things that others have done that he perceived as wronging him. How sad. This man built a wall against any possibility of reconciliation. He was not loving those other people. He was about loving himself and himself alone. We all know people who know that someone did something to offend them and they will never let it go. They keep a record. This is not love and this is certainly not the kind of love that God has and that Paul is telling us to have. Let it go! Let God deal with those things. This is where a really bad memory is a real blessing. And I might add, if another person did that because of you, how would you deal with that?

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The third characteristic that Paul tells us about love is that it is enduring. No matter how great your gift, it will die but love will endure forever. There is a lot that we do not know now but a time is coming when we will know so much more. What we know today may or may not continue but the love which we have will endure. People are often so concerned with their legacy. Every president in my lifetime has spent a lot of energy trying to establish his legacy. This is a waste of energy for the legacy that will survive is the legacy of faith, hope and love. All else will go away.

Paul tells us that these will survive but one of these virtues is greater than the others. These virtues demonstrate the spiritual maturity of a church. These are the traits of those who are no longer children in the faith but those that have grown to maturity.

Of all that Christians will do, and some of these things are wonderful, only faith, hope and love will endure. Of these three, love excels. It is the greatest virtue of all.

Why are Christians hopeful? We can be hopeful because of God’s love for us. All that He has done for us is attributed to His wonderful love. Because He loves you, Jesus died for you. Because He loves you, you can have eternal life. Now, does your legacy provide something for others because you have loved God first, then because you have loved the church and the people in it, and because you have loved individuals? Go out from here and show love to those that you encounter.